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Phoenix

(part II)

Spy net engulfs all S. Vietnam's citizens

by Stewart Kellerman
in Saigon

LINH is a poor farmer. He grows rice on an acre of land near the South China Sea. He lives with his wife and three children in a cramped hut made of straw and mud.

Linh—like millions of other—has been forced by the South Vietnamese Government to spy on his own family for the Phoenix programme, a controversial allied drive using torture and assassination to destroy the Communist political leadership in South Vietnam.

"I don't want to get into trouble," Linh said through a translator. "That's why I tell the government what they want. I don't tell them everything, of course. Just as much as I have to."

The Phoenix programme has tried to get a *gia truong* (family head) like Linh to spy in every hut, house and shanty in South Vietnam. They're the lowest rungs on a massive intelligence apparatus providing reports on suspected leaders of the Communist National Liberation Front (NLF).

The *gia truongs* don't get any money for their information—just prosecution as suspected Communists if they fail to report accurately on the actions of their families.

Allied sources said the Phoenix programme also employs a large network of paid informers—national police, undercover men, civilian secret agents, army intelligence experts and gangs

of gunmen organised by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The reports from informers move up through channels to hundreds of District Intelligence Operations Commands (DIOCs), the hubs of the Phoenix programme. Each DIOC is manned by South Vietnamese soldiers, police and psychological warfare specialists as well as an unofficial member from the U.S. army, American sources said.

U.S. intelligence officers said the DIOCs use the reports to prepare "target folders" on suspected political leaders of the Vietcong, the Saigon government's name for the NLF.

The officials said green sheets of paper in the folders are used to list such items as physical descriptions, friends and visiting habits of suspects. Pink sheets are used for copies of all agent reports on suspects.

South Vietnamese Phoenix officials said informants are graded on a scale ranging from A (completely reliable) to F (reliability cannot be judged). They said information provided by agents is grade from 1 (confirmed) to 6 (truth cannot be judged).

DIOC members—after deciding a suspect is likely to be a Communist leader—meet to decide how he should be "neutralised." The suspect can be assassinated, arrested or talked into switching sides.

A former U.S. Phoenix coordinator (adviser) said most DIOCs require at least a C3 rating—agent fairly reliable, information possibly true—before "targeting" a suspect for assassination.

The field police, strike arm of the national police, are usually used for arrests. CIA-financed PRU's, members of Province Reconnaissance Units, are used to kill suspects, according to allied intelligence sources.

But in Vietnam, no operation is water-tight. Allied intelligence officers said most Communist political leaders find out—through information leakage—that they've been targeted for assassination or arrest and go into hiding before the government can get to them.

They said the Phoenix programme then issues wanted posters showing mug shots and offering small rewards for information about the whereabouts of suspects.

The programme recently began a trial project in a few provinces offering bounties euphemistically called "maximum incentive awards" of several thousand dollars for really high Communist leaders—dead or alive.

After a suspect is arrested, the next step is a trip to a Province Interrogation Centre (PIC) also organised by the CIA, according to allied sources.

A former U.S. Phoenix adviser said torture is used at all PICs, although interrogators usually use psychological rather than physical techniques. A couple of favorites are:

1. Cover a suspect's face with a wet washcloth. Pour soapy water over the cloth each time he refuses to answer a question. The water isn't supposed to hurt him, but it gives the suspect the impression he's drowning.

2. Tie a suspect to a chair and attach wires to a 12-volt car battery. Shock the suspect every time he refuses to answer a question. If he's really a tough customer, apply the wires to the genitals.

When the questioning is over, the suspect is brought before a province security committee headed by the local province chief.

The committee has the power to sentence a suspect in secret trials to a maximum of two years in prison. The sentence, however, is renewable indefinitely as long as Vietnam is at war.

U.S. sources said the suspect cannot question his accusers or even find out who they are. "It's pretty much up to the province chief," one American official said. "If he's a good man there'll be a fair trial. If he's not, there won't."

"I think it's safe to say that when it's all over not many people get off," one current Phoenix adviser said. "Just about everybody who makes the whole route winds up in jail."—UPI

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